

CAC's new CSM knows what NCOs bring to the battlefield

By Master Sgt. Lisa Hunter

As the top NCO for 3rd Army, headquartered in Atlanta, Ga., Command Sgt. Maj. John D. Sparks saw first-hand what it takes to win a war and what NCOs bring to the battlefield. At the height of the Iraqi war, 3rd Army's deployed headquarters, the Coalition Forces Land Component Command, commanded

under pressure and whose contributions helped the Coalition forces win the war and enforce the peace.

"The NCO is the most powerful weapon we have. We have to make sure he or she is prepared to engage and destroy the enemy," said Sparks. After serving 18 months at 3rd Army, Sparks was recently reassigned as the command sergeant major for the Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kan.

During the year and a half Sparks was assigned to 3rd Army, he spent most of his time ensuring that NCOs were prepared for combat. According to Sparks, it's a process that – to be successful – must start long before they deploy.

Now, in his position as the Combined Arms Center command sergeant major, Sparks will carry that mission a step further by ensuring that Soldiers are properly trained for combat through the NCO Education System.

At 3rd Army, the headquarters of all the ground-combat units in Operation Iraqi Freedom, Sparks described his duties as "kind of fluid." Sparks described his job as something of a fact-finding mission, where he would visit NCOs and Soldiers and report their concerns and success stories back to the 3rd Army commander.

"A sergeant will certainly talk to you about what [he or she] needs and how their missions went. I find out information from them – what their roles in combat are – and take it back to the general," he explained. "Theater-level commands



Photo by Sgt. 1st Class David K. Dismukes, CFLCC Public Affairs

Command Sgt. Maj. John Sparks (left) talks with Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) senior intelligence officer Maj. Gen. James Marks (center) and Lt. Gen. David McKiernan (right), CFLCC commander, about operations in central Iraq.

more than 15,000 Soldiers. Overall, CFLCC was the headquarters for nearly 200,000 Soldiers prepositioned for combat in Iraq.

CFLCC was responsible for theater-level resupply of forces, including the regeneration of units and individual Soldiers, the resupply of subsistence and ammunition, the R&R program, MWR programs and even the number of trucks crossing the Kuwaiti border into Iraq. But Sparks will tell you that we would have never won the war if it had not been for the professional performance of NCOs.

"I was impressed when I saw Soldiers taking care of sick and wounded, delivering supplies," said Sparks, speaking of 3rd Army Soldiers he observed on duty during the ground war. "I saw a specialist who is a medic stay past her shift to be with a patient. I saw a truck driver who volunteered to run another shift for his buddy who was tired."

Sparks spoke of Soldiers who sacrificed their opportunity to take R&R to stay and run missions and the many, many Soldiers he saw who epitomized grace



Photo by Sgt. Gustavo Bahena, CJTF 7 Public Affairs Office

Coalition Joint Task Force 7 Command Sgt. Maj. John Sparks (right) presents a coin to Sgt. Desmond Green, an M1-A1 tank loader with Company B, 3rd Battalion, 69th Armored Cavalry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, Fort Stewart, Ga.

don't win wars; small units that are forward deployed win wars and their successes are greatly based on the performance of NCOs."

To make sure those NCOs are well-trained and prepared to succeed, Sparks recommends that training focus on what makes NCOs to start with: marksmanship, unit training and precombat inspections and checks, he said. "Every Soldier is a warfighter. There is no separation, regardless of component – whether they are National Guard, Reserve or active duty. They are all Soldiers. We all have to live the Warrior Ethos. Every Soldier is a warrior and they have to train that way. It doesn't matter if the Soldier is a truck driver, a fueler or a medic. They all have to be trained to the same optimum level."

Sparks believes that Soldiers' training should include more than just basic Soldier skills. The Soldiers should know cultural issues and be sensitive to those host-nation concerns, such as religious beliefs. Soldiers should learn the differences between the Sunnis and Shiites.

"Our Soldiers are smart," he said. "[In Iraq] they adjusted their behavior based on who they were dealing with. And they taught other Soldiers to do the same."

Sparks recommended that Soldiers who are deploying talk to and learn from Soldiers who have just returned from deployment, especially to bone up on subjects such as improvised explosive devices. "There are Soldiers going into and coming back from theater all the time," he said. "Only a Soldier who has been there will tell you what you really need to know."

But there are other means for Soldiers to keep current on what's going on. Sparks recommended that Soldiers start with reviewing recently posted lessons learned on the Center for Army Lessons Learned Web site at <http://www.call.army.mil>.

He also believes Soldiers should do whatever they can to make themselves more physically fit. "When these Soldiers go out on patrol, they've got their weapons, basic loads of ammunition and sapper plates in their Ranger vests. They're carrying a lot of extra weight in extreme conditions, such as 130-degree heat in body armor. They need to be as physically fit as possible."

Training Soldiers to survive and succeed in combat is only part of building that powerful weapon, according to Sparks. Helping Soldiers prepare their families for extended separations is just as important as combat training.

"Squad leaders and platoon sergeants should help their Soldiers' families form a bond, so they can take care of each other during the deployment. We have to prepare our families for the eventuality of the Soldiers being gone for 12 months.



Photo by Sgt. Gustavo Bahena, CJTF 7 Public Affairs Office

(Left to right) Command Sgt. Maj. John Sparks, Sgt. Maj. Lawrence S. Stevens, Pfc. Adrian D. Revel and Coalition Joint Task Force 7 Commander Lt. Gen. David McKiernan cut a cake during the Army's 228th birthday celebration at the headquarters of CJTF 7.

Bonding between family members is just as important as bonding between Soldiers," Sparks explained.

The training doesn't stop when the deployment starts, he said. NCOs need to think about the next phase. "Think about where you want the Soldier to be by the end of the deployment. Where do you want him to be mentally, at what skill level, what job do you want him to be able to do? We need to look at how to retain Soldiers, so we can capitalize on their knowledge."

During the ground war, Sparks traveled throughout 3rd Army's area of responsibility, talking to Soldiers and NCOs about their concerns and challenges during the war and then reporting back to the 3rd Army commanding general on what he had observed.

"I was always proud when I saw a young sergeant at a checkpoint with a car-load of people coming toward him. Here's a 21- or 22-year-old Soldier taking charge in a life-or-death situation. It makes you proud to see a young sergeant working one or two pay grades above his grade," he said. "I am very proud of 3rd Army and the accomplishments of its Soldiers during the ground campaign. These Soldiers are heroes, not just in my view, but to the American public.

Even now that Sparks has moved to the Combined Arms Center, he insists that he did not leave a legacy at 3rd Army.

"I believe the organization leaves a legacy, not the command sergeant major and the commanding general," he said. "Third Army's legacy is that it's a warfighting headquarters capable of any real-world mission."

Now, Sparks is using his experience to build the NCO Corps' legacy in his new position. At the Combined Arms Center, he faces a new set of challenges, redesigning the NCO Education System for an Army at war. For Sparks, it all comes down to one issue: to build the Army's arsenal by training NCOs to be even more powerful weapons.